World Chronicle

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HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS

Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Ethiopia, Angola, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo. These are just some countries receiving humanitarian support from the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Today's humanitarian emergencies are both multidimensional and complex, and many actors – such as governments, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and individuals – seek to respond simultaneously. OCHA works with them to ensure that there is a coherent framework within which each actor can contribute effectively and promptly to the overall effort. In this **World Chronicle,** Sergio Vieira de Mello, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, discusses humanitarian emergencies in countries that have suffered from natural and man-made disasters.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has the mandate to coordinate United Nations' assistance in humanitarian crises around the world. The UN's main goal in humanitarian action is to help civilian victims of conflicts and natural disasters. It does this by providing humanitarian assistance and, if necessary, protection. In 1998, more than two billion dollars in humanitarian assistance was requested to support almost 13 million people.

Our guest today is an expert on the question of humanitarian emergencies. He is Sergio Vieira de Mello, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Joining me to talk with Mr. de Mello are Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

Mr. de Mello, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Under-Secretary-General, I'm sure that my colleagues will want to ask you questions about Kosovo, where you were for some time as the interim administrator and East Timor, where Judy Lessing spent some time this year. But I would like to ask you about Angola because I listened to a BBC programme, as a matter of fact just a few days ago, and it seems to me that Angola must be one of the forgotten catastrophes in the world because one doesn't read very much about Angola, although the BBC gave it some attention, and some terrible things are happening there. The Secretary-General was quoted as having said that it's the worst place in the world for a child to be born because the life expectancy is 42. There's been a civil war going on for years and years and years with the government side supported by very substantial oil revenues and the rebel side supported by gold and diamonds. What is your operation doing there?

DE MELLO: Thank you first of all for putting to me a question on Angola, the first question. I'm happy that we start with Africa, unlike so many other interviews where Kosovo and East Timor are prominent. Rightly so perhaps in their own context but we tend to forget Africa. Angola is one of the conflicts on the African continent that we practically don't talk about unless images of starving children hit our screens, as was the case also in Southern Sudan last year as you will remember. Angola is a protracted and indefinite tragedy. You

may recall that in 1997 some progress was being made in terms of normalization, pacification of Angola and the number of internally displaced persons had dropped to about 700,000, which is already a huge number but still much less than used to be the case. Today, just over a year and a half later, with the intensification of the war, we are close to two million internally displaced. Plus hundreds of thousands of refugees in Zambia and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, contributing therefore to the general instability of that sub-region. Of these two million internally displaced we are able to assist just over half. That is, those who live on the coastline and those who have made it to the provincial capitals that today we can only reach by air in an extremely costly airlift, life-saving type of operation. And costly means that we need obviously more funds than is normally the case for a humanitarian operation where land access is possible. What I'm trying to say is that we are short of funds, we are short of access to populations in extreme need and we can only barely assist those who are trapped, besieged in provincial capitals.

LITTLEJOHNS: But both sides, both the government and the rebels have access to enormous resources because Angola is very rich in natural resources. What are they doing to help their own people, on both sides?

DE MELLO: On the part of the government we received good news recently that it had allocated 20 million dollars to assist internally displaced populations which is an important step. We had been telling them you cannot count entirely, exclusively, on international solidarity unless you are seen to be devoting part of the oil resources in particular to the benefit of your own people rather than to the prosecution of the war. On the UNITA side we know very little because we have been unable to visit their areas now for quite some time. Therefore we don't know how many are in need and we don't know what their needs are and certainly we have no idea as to what UNITA of Dr. Savimbi is doing to assist them.

BASSIR POUR: I'd like to actually stay in Africa since Michael brought it up. I was struck by something I saw in the Sudan – another protracted, forgotten war – was the fate of the internally displaced people as opposed to the fate of the refugees. There's so many internally displaced people now in all the conflicts and UNHCR is in charge of refugees. When we ask why are these two categories of people treated so differently people from UNHCR, the Refugee Commission, said we're not in charge of them. Who is in charge? The government obviously doesn't take care of these people. Who is supposed to deal with

internally displaced people of which there are millions now?

DE MELLO: Yes. Thank you again for putting your question on the Sudan, a country I feel strongly about because I happen to have spent part of my youth in Southern Sudan at the end of the first civil war that, unfortunately, resumed only a few years later and is still ongoing. Internally displaced persons in the Sudan are looked after by what we call "Operation Lifeline Sudan". That operation is mainly managed by UNICEF and the World Food Programme. UNHCR, as you said, has a mandate to look after those people who actually cross international borders. So Sudanese refugees in Uganda, in Kenya, in Ethiopia are looked after by the High Commissioner of Refugees. Inside the Sudan it's a combined operation, which incidentally we manage from here in New York, but involving mainly UNICEF and WFP. And to give an idea of the cost of the operation we were spending last year one million dollars per day transporting, again, food and other supplies by air because, as in the case of Angola, access by land is impossible.

BASSIR POUR: But apart from the Sudan in general the IDPs, the internally displaced people, whose responsibility are they?

DE MELLO: It depends on each specific situation. Sometimes even the High Commissioner for Refugees looks after them as is the case in Azerbaijan for instance. In others it is a combination of agencies. In other situations still it is one or the other humanitarian agency, including the International Committee of the Red Cross. So it's a shared responsibility because no single agency in the United Nations system has responsibility for the internally displaced, something that we might have to redress one of these days.

LESSING: I'd like to add to that by saying that the High Commission for Refugees helped some of the internally displaced people in Timor who fled into the UN compound, absolutely terrified, and there was nobody else to look after them. So I'd like to ask you about Timor. There's a situation which became horrible very quickly and your office and other offices had to get involved when I suppose you weren't really expecting to. What happens in a situation like that which blows up not overnight but very quickly?

DE MELLO: What happens is unfortunately what has happened in the case of East Timor. We immediately tried to establish a mechanism inside East Timor and in neighbouring West Timor that would respond to those needs. This obviously was impossible in the first chaotic phase when most of the international staff as you know were besieged in

the UN compound. But even then we sent fresh humanitarian staff into Dili so that they would be on the spot ready to move out and do their job as soon as security conditions permitted. On the other side, in West Timor as you know, because of similar insecurity most of the international humanitarian staff had to leave. But following negotiations, in particular between Mrs. Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees, and President Habibie, we have now been able to return and access to those who crossed the boundary and our ability to determine whether they wish to go back to East Timor or to settle in West Timor or in other parts of Indonesia, that access has improved since a couple of days.

LESSING: But if you have a situation like East Timor which happened relatively suddenly, or you have an earthquake or a cyclone or a hurricane, which also, although you can in some cases see it coming if it's a storm, you nevertheless have to be ready to move very quickly at almost a moment's notice. How ready is the UN to do that?

DE MELLO: Oh we are, certainly, for those emergencies. We could talk about the recent earthquake in Turkey for instance. Our office in Geneva has what we call a standby capacity particularly in terms of mobilizing search and rescue teams. Those teams can be deployed within 24 hours. In the case of Turkey hundreds of rescuers poured into the Istanbul and Izmet area in a matter of hours and it is our office that immediately dispatches the disaster assessment and coordination team that ensures that those search and rescue teams coming from different countries that we activate divide labour in a rational manner depending on actual needs. So that system to respond to natural disasters is very much there; very effective. We're often not very good at publicizing their achievements but they do their work very discreetly, very effectively and we often use them also to respond to emergencies as is the case right now in East Timor.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. de Mello I'd like to ask you about the military contribution to humanitarian activities in Kosovo where, as I mentioned earlier, you were the interim administrator. The NATO forces, I think, also did some humanitarian work and the Australian-led multinational force in East Timor did likewise. To what extent does your office call on the military in such situations and how helpful are they?

DE MELLO: First of all it is obvious that in ideal circumstances humanitarian agencies, be it the United Nations or non-governmental, should be able to provide protection and assistance on their own without having to resort to the support of military forces. Unfortunately, in recent years, the magnitude of some of the problems we've had to deal with

– I'm thinking of Bosnia, I am thinking of the situation in the Great Lakes following the genocide, I'm thinking of Kosovo with that sudden outpouring of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Macedonia and Albania, and I'm thinking most recently of the situation in East Timor – humanitarian agencies find their rapid response capacity overwhelmed, overtaken by the size of the problem. And there clearly the military have the logistical and engineering capacity that humanitarian agencies often lack. The military provided us with aircraft to keep an airlift into Sarajevo going for several years, as you would remember, which would have otherwise cost a fortune. The military helped us immediately assist the two million refugees that arrived in Eastern Zaire in those days from Rwanda in the summer of 1994. We would have been unable to do that on our own. And you saw in Macedonia and in Kosovo the excellent support we received from them, not least in terms of setting up refugee camps in a matter of hours which only military engineers can actually do. Now obviously a line must be drawn between the military purpose of a deployment, as was the case of NATO forces in the countries neighbouring the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the humanitarian support they provided to UNHCR and other agencies. But by and large in those situations, as is also the case right now in East Timor with INTERFET, their support to us is often indispensable. And in the case of East Timor also in terms of providing humanitarian staff with protection that no one else is capable of providing.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Sergio Vieira de Mello, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

BASSIR POUR: As you know, this year's General Debate, the 54th Session in the General Assembly, was dominated by humanitarian intervention and examples were given of Kosovo and of East Timor versus national sovereignty. It seems to divide the world actually. What's your opinion of this debate? Will it go far and where do you stand on this?

DE MELLO: The debate has been there for some time. If you look back at one of the introductions by former Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar to one of his annual reports he had already stated quite clearly that sovereignty could not be used by Member States as a, you know, mirror or a.....

BASSIR POUR: Shield.

DE MELLO: .....a shield or a curtain behind which governments could hide in order to carry out outrageous acts or massive violations of human rights. This year, the Secretary-General had the courage of putting this issue straight on the table and in the public eye

where it belongs. I think his.....

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean Perez de Cuellar didn't push it forward?

DE MELLO: It was not the central theme in those days. I'm speaking of the late '80s. It was one among several themes. The time was not ripe for him to put it squarely at the centre of the debate, which the Secretary-General did this year.

LITTLEJOHNS: But judging from the reaction perhaps the time was not ripe today?

DE MELLO: I wonder. I think several countries that we thought might react negatively in fact recognized that the debate was there, that the dilemma existed and that therefore there was no way in which it could be avoided any further.

BASSIR POUR: China apparently.

DE MELLO: Exactly.

BASSIR POUR: It's very interesting.

DE MELLO: Exactly. So I believe the majority understands that this is a central issue that needs to be addressed. Incidentally, the mere fact that the Security Council several months ago requested the Secretary-General to present a report to it on the protection of civilian populations in conflict, meaning internal conflict, and on means for the Security Council to improve their legal and physical protection was a clear indication that the Security Council itself recognizes that the treatment of civilian populations inside the borders of states is no longer merely a question that belongs to the domestic jurisdiction of states and that the international community, the United Nations in particular, has a right to monitor the internal situation and, whenever necessary, to intervene. Now if I may, the term intervention is perhaps unfortunate because you tend to immediately associate with that word the notion of military force when in fact the Secretary-General has been quite clear in stating that intervention has different meanings. It can be political intervention, it can be influence, persuasion. It can be humanitarian intervention. It can be the targeting of those whose behaviour the Security Council wishes to change through smart sanctions, through financial sanctions.

LITTLEJOHNS: What are smart sanctions?

DE MELLO: Smart sanctions in our vocabulary are sanctions that are careful not to punish unduly the civilian population that is not responsible for the behaviour of their leaders. So these are sanctions that.....

LITTLEJOHNS: So the sanctions in Iraq are not smart sanctions?

BASSIR POUR: No. They're targeted. Is that you mean targeted against the regime itself?

DE MELLO: Exactly. That is the idea. Targets the individuals to the extent possible. Their financial interests – we were discussing this earlier – their ability to travel including, when this is warranted, through international criminal prosecution which is why the International Criminal Court is so important in terms of enabling the international community to hold leaders accountable, judicially accountable, for the crimes they commit. So this is just to clarify that intervention can have many different meanings and is not necessarily associated with the use of military force.

LESSING: But when you use the term intervention, and as you say it covers a very broad spectrum, in some of the definitions you get involved and your department gets involved along with some of the other humanitarian agencies of the UN. Is the United Nations stretched in any way? Do you have enough people right through the system to respond to it seems to me an ever-increasing workload?

DE MELLO: If you pool all the resources of the humanitarian agencies I believe the answer is yes although with a number of emergencies that we have been faced with in '98 and '99 at times some of these agencies have felt overtaken by events including in terms of their ability to deploy sufficient staff to the field, as was the case around Kosovo recently. And you know, the advantage of operational agencies is that they can hire rather quickly. They can expand but they can also contract. So the answer to your question is as a rule yes, but recent years have been so harsh in the numbers of conflict-related emergencies and natural disasters that at times the number of staff available has been insufficient.

BASSIR POUR: Sergio, I've heard you speak with passion of most every situation in the world where there is a humanitarian disaster except Iraq where people have been under sanction, as Michael mentioned, for nearly 10 years now. And we know by reports from UNICEF and World Food Programme how this has affected children and a whole generation of Iraqis. Now I don't think I've ever heard you speak of Iraq. Is it on the agenda of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, of which you're president? Do you intend to go there? I know it's politically explosive obviously but what is it your agency, your department can do about this?

DE MELLO: You know we deal with many politically explosive issues and that has

never stopped us from acting or speaking with passion about it. No. the case of Iraq is very simple. As you know, there is a separate mechanism which is called "Oil-for-Food" which is managed by another colleague. It's a bit like UNRWA that looks after Palestinian refugees. The Iraqi humanitarian operation is handled by another office and therefore is not treated by us in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. It used to be incidentally but has been transferred to another office. Secondly, as you are aware, the Security Council did establish in January three panels that were intended to look at the situation in Iraq and the regime imposed on Iraq in a comprehensive manner. And one of the panels was devoted to humanitarian questions and I was a member of it. We submitted our report, through the chairman of those three panels, to the Security Council and as you know we're still waiting for the Council to come to a decision. That report, which is not a secret document, contained a number of recommendations that were intended to improve the living conditions of the civilian population in Iraq which must not, like anywhere else in the world, be held responsible for the behaviour of their leaders. So a lot is being done. Perhaps we haven't given it sufficient profile but I can assure you it's not a forgotten question.

LESSING: But how do you push political entities or how do you push governments who have political ideas about what should and shouldn't happen? And it could be Iraq or it could have been the Indonesians over East Timor until fairly recently. How can you use your powers of persuasion? What do you do?

DE MELLO: We do a lot of advocacy. Some of it as I just said is discreet, is behind closed doors because it is more effective if performed in that manner. I'm speaking in particular of the many briefings that we provide to members of the Security Council and which, you know, are fairly outspoken. I don't mince my words when I go to the Security Council. But we also engage in open advocacy campaigns and there I must say that the role of the media is key because you do not always respond to our appeals and you know that often one of the only effective means of getting governments, especially those that have an interest and an influence over a particular conflict, to act is through public opinion, through their parliaments, and there the role of the media is essential. So as I often do, please help us to keep all conflicts, particularly the forgotten ones, very high on the agenda of the public because the public does not differentiate between conflicts we have noticed.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. de Mello, are there any other conflicts coming down the pike that you can see? We only have a few seconds left.

DE MELLO: Well, I certainly refuse to engage in that sort of prediction. I think we have too many, too many. And incidentally even when conflicts are predictable, as was the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea that I would be visiting in a few days we were....

LITTLEJOHNS: That's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Sergio Vieira de Mello, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. He was interviewed by Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**